



# Media Image Presentation of Female Athletes in Beijing Winter Olympic Games Taking *People's Daily's* WeChat Report as an Example

Yurong Li<sup>(✉)</sup>

School of Journalism and Communication, Jinan University, Guangzhou 510632, China  
yung316@stu2021.jnu.edu.cn

**Abstract.** The media is the final judge of the success of an Olympic Games. Winter Olympics coverage plays an irreplaceable role in national image construction and international communication. As Beijing is the only city in the world hosting double Olympic Games, it is of practical significance to study the media image of female athletes during this period for correctly constructing female social image and improving media literacy and gender awareness. The sample of this study is the reports about female athletes in the WeChat official account of *People's Daily* during the Winter Olympic Games. Through content analysis, the report characteristics and media images of female athletes are analysed, and the reasons behind the formation of media images of female athletes are analysed. The study found that coverage of female athletes was overwhelmingly positive and focused on individual achievements. On the one hand, there are still a large number of reports about female athletes' lifestyle in WeChat, strengthening the traditional female image of female athletes as sensitive and gentle. On the other hand, WeChat reports also create powerful and warm images of female athletes. Although female athletes reports cannot escape the male gaze, *People's Daily's* WeChat reports make a qualitative leap in expressing positive affirmation of female values and personality spirit. Future female athlete reports need to create more healthy, independent, professional and meaningful female images in the new era to eliminate prejudice and discrimination against female images.

**Keywords:** Beijing Winter Olympic Games · Female Athletes · Media Image · WeChat

## 1 Introduction

The full name of the Winter Olympic Games is the World's largest comprehensive winter games. It is held every four years. It has alternated with the Summer Olympic Games since 1994. The 24th Winter Olympic Games will be held in Beijing and officially opened on February 4, 2022. The Winter Olympic Games consists of 7 events, 15 events and 109 events. It is a great sports event attracting worldwide attention. The success of the Winter Olympics is particularly significant for China, as Beijing has become the first Olympic city in the world to host both the Summer and Winter Olympics.

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As former IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch said, the media is the final judge of the success of an Olympic Games. Winter Olympics coverage plays an irreplaceable role in national image construction and international communication [1]. China government also pointed out that the Beijing Winter Olympics is a major landmark event at an important historical juncture of China, and an important opportunity to show the country's image, promote the country's development and inspire the national spirit. How to build on the success of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and making further progress in the 2022 Beijing Olympic Winter Games is more challenging [2]. Therefore, the analysis and review of relevant reports during the Winter Olympics is helpful to understand China's political, economic and cultural ecology.

Sports have always been known as the "Boys Club," which means that gender inequality has existed since the birth of modern and ancient sports. With the influence of feminist awareness in the 1970s, feminism gradually intervened in the field of sports. In a certain period of time when sports news reports focus on the attention of people, the media image of female athletes has become an important indicator to measure social development. In the process of media choosing to deal with various information related to athletes and forming media works, athletes' own personality characteristics and behaviour are inevitably influenced by the country and society. Media workers will also be influenced by social ideology, cultural identity, media positioning and other personal factors, which further affect the media image of female athletes, thus forming objective and subjective "mimicry image" [3]. On the one hand, as the elite group in the female group, female athletes play a role of benchmarking behaviour demonstration among the female members of the general society. On the other hand, when the public browse the related reports of female athletes, they will form their cognition about the image of female athletes in their minds, which will enrich the female sports culture to a certain extent, change people's stereotype of women and even change people's sports practice [4]. Therefore, by studying the image of female athletes shaped in the digital platform of traditional media and the characteristics of media image shaping, this research explores what factors affect the image construction of female athletes, so as to guide.

## 2 Literature Review

The concept of media image spread first appeared in the western academic study, in the 1920s, Walter Lippmann in his book "public opinion", put forward: "the mass media reports for us to construct a virtual reality environment, the mimicry of reality is a lot of people so as to understand reality, judge for reference and basis. This reference clearly has its limitations, and how much it isomorphism or contrast with the real world can seriously affect our perceptions." Lippmann's hypothesis of "mimicry environment" laid a foundation for the study of the concept of "media image". In the 1960s, the concept of "media image" formally appeared in Joseph Terenaman and Denis McQuail's research on the media image effect of political figures in the British general election. Media image is defined as the image of media organization and the image of people, things and things in media. From the definition, we can see that the overall media image can be divided into two perspectives. On the one hand, the image of media organization refers to the appearance of media formed in the society and market to influence the public and

express themselves. The image of people, things and things in the media refers to both an individual and a group of people, such as doctors, migrant workers and women. About events, such as the Olympics and the epidemic; About things, such as national image, regional image [5].

This study focuses on the media images of female athletes, which can be understood as alternative information symbols that can form cognition presented to the audience through media processing of information about women athletes based on certain ideology and value cognition [6]. In terms of text, information symbols can be understood as reporting topics, reporting frames and reporting tendencies of female athletes. In addition, pictures are also listed as one of the information symbols, and the expressions, clothes and body forms of female athletes shown in pictures will also present the media images of female athletes. Regardless of text or picture, the presentation of reports is processed based on certain ideology and value cognition to express the image of female athletes. Therefore, this study investigates the presentation of media image of female athletes based on all the above factors.

As early as in the wave of the second world women's movement, feminist researchers have begun to combine feminist theoretical research with other disciplines. In her book *The Feminine Mystification*, Betty Friedan revealed that the image of happy women shaped by the media was not consistent with real life, and this image of "happy housewife" had a great impact on the women's movement. Gail Tashman's *Bed Stove and Home: Women in the Medium* explores how mass communication portrays women at work [7]. Since then, studies on women and sports media began in the 1980s. On the one hand, from the perspective of media practitioners, the relationship between female journalists, female athletes and reporting was discussed. For example, the female sports journalists in New Zealand were interviewed, and the reporting discrimination of female athletes was analysed from the perspective of communicators [8]. On the other hand, women consciousness and sports media image link analysis, such as Karl Austin by analysing the picture on the television media, newspapers, magazines and other reports of women's sports, and found that there is great imbalance between men and women sports coverage, female athletes more attention to appearance, this will affect the enthusiasm of women to participate in sports [9]. To sum up, "Women and media: The initial research in this field found that the presentation of female sports media was influenced by the number of female practitioners and gender consciousness, and the reports generally showed discrimination against female athletes.

In recent years, with the progress of society and the development of economy, the media image of female athletes has been influenced by many aspects. When investigating the image of female athletes in traditional media, content analysis and text analysis are usually carried out from the aspects of reporting subject, reporting item, reporting theme, reporting background and reporting stance. For example, Lin Zijiang made a comparison between Chinese and foreign sports media reports and found that When Chinese media reported female athletes, they more often associated the images of female athletes with the country and the collective, and paid attention to the depiction of the physical features of female athletes. Bi Weina and Ma Yuefei also verified this point of view by analysing WeChat reports of *People's Daily*, and further expounded the phenomenon that female athletes are still watched under the gaze of men due to the fact that there are too many life

reports of female athletes and the feminine characteristics of sensibility and weakness are strengthened [10]. The body discourse of female athletes can be divided into competitive body, social gender body and life body. Through the analysis of the three traditional media in China, it is found that the life body reports of female athletes are the most, so it can be concluded that the body subjectivity of female athletes under the male gaze is seriously insufficient [11]. Therefore, An Linlin concluded that the media image of female athletes created by traditional media is mainly influenced by the social gender awareness, national identity awareness, female stereotype and consumerism of media practitioners [3].

Studies on female athletes in online media are more diversified. Although the dimensions of investigation are still mostly from the perspectives of reporting subject matter, reporting item, reporting position, reporting quantity, etc., the types of subjects are also more complex. In addition, it is helpful to understand the differences of media images of female athletes by analyzing the emotional preference and content preference in reports. For example, Through the analysis of sports portal websites, Chen Ruixue found that the stereotype of women in online media was not weakened [12]. Reports in online media tend to focus more on their appearance and body [13], and the popularity of female athletes also determines the number of reports [14]. Pictures are an important way of expression in network media. Weng Jie found that women in sports pictures also have stereotypes. Further analysis of the CCTV5 official website shows that most of the female athletes in the pictures have long hair, and the pictures emphasize femininity. Influenced by consumerism, most of the female athletes have outstanding appearance, slim body and backbone body [15].

At present, many scholars have conducted researches on female media images in the field of sports, but they lack representativeness. The researches mainly focus on the female images reflected in a certain competition or a certain period of time, including female athlete images in a newspaper or a certain platform for a certain period of time. Because the economic situation is constantly changing, and the communication of new media focuses on reflecting the current social value cognition. The above studies still lack timeliness in representing the current image of female athletes, on the one hand, due to the timeliness of sports reports is much higher than other reports, previous studies cannot reflect the media image presentation and reporting trend of female athletes. On the other hand, due to the Olympics are being held in Beijing, the opportunity is much higher than before the Olympic Games, and appeared in female athletes Gu Ailing, Xu Mengtao good female player, so what are the typical features of female athletes in the Olympic image rendering, the factors influencing reported what is still worth exploring.

To sum up, this study will adopt content analysis method to analyse the WeChat reports of *People's Daily* and explore what characteristics are present in the reports of female athletes? What kind of female media images have been created? And what questions are hidden behind these media images?

This study has practical and theoretical significance. By analysing and sorting out female media images in traditional media digital platforms, this study summarizes the media images of female athletes, so as to explore the media images of female athletes and the underlying problems. On the one hand, this horizontal research enriches and expands the research on female image in media and women field, which has certain theoretical

significance. On the other hand, with the gradual awakening of female consciousness, understanding the changes of female athletes' media images and thinking about the deficiencies of female athletes' images are of practical significance for correctly constructing female social images and improving media literacy and gender awareness.

### 3 Methods

This study collected WeChat reports of female athletes in *People's Daily* from Feb. 04-Feb. 20, 2020, and analyse the media images of female athletes and the problems behind them from the perspectives of reporting framework, reporting background and reporting stance. A total of 69 WeChat reports were collected.

There are two reasons for choosing the WeChat official account of *People's Daily* as the research object. On the one hand, as the official newspaper of the CPC Central Committee, *People's Daily* is worthy of being the centre and banner of China's mainstream media. The female images created by *People's Daily* in different historical stages catered to the needs of social development and reflected the policies of the state, and their essence was an expression of political rights and ideology. Through the shaping of women media by *People's Daily*, it can be seen more keenly perceive the attention of the Party and the state to women. On the other hand, *People's Daily* is the most successful central media in today's digital transformation. It not only has its own exclusive client "*People's Daily Website*", but also has more than 200 million readers on its official account. The transformation experience of *People's Daily* has created a relatively mature and completed comprehensive digital communication system, with extensive and far-reaching influence and rich reporting content. At present, it is typical and representative for the study of female media image construction under the background of traditional media digital transformation, which is suitable for the research sample.

### 4 Results

In the WeChat report of the *People's Daily* during the Winter Olympics, Chinese female athletes accounted for 86%, and female athletes from other countries, including the United States and Switzerland, accounted for 14% (Table 1).

#### 4.1 Background: Highlight the Report of Gold Medal Supremacy

Report background refers to the reason and environmental conditions for the release of the report. In general, the background of WeChat reports on competition victory or personal achievements accounted for the highest proportion, accounting for 51.5%. The lowest number of reported game losses was only 6.2%. In addition to the above two backgrounds, WeChat reports are often accompanied by quotations from interviews with female athletes and descriptions of interesting stories outside the stadium, accounting for 42.3%. In addition, the WeChat report also highlighted the description of local conditions and customs, accounting for 18.6%.

**Table 1.** The report of gold medal supremacy

Background	Personal achievements	local customs and practices	Interview anecdotes	Fail
Chinese athletes	61.0%	13.0%	20.8%	5.2%
Athletes from other countries	15%	40%	35%	10%
Total	51.5%	18.6%	23.7%	6.2%

#### 4.2 Body Shape in the Report: Competitive Body is Still the Mainstream

The body narrative under the construction of media has three dimensions: competitive body, gender body and life body. Competitive physical report refers to the report on technical state, mental state, performance ranking and sports career; Gender body is the attention and description of female athletes' femininity; Lifestyle body is a description of the daily state of athletes, talking about the daily life of female athletes, even their personal hobbies. In the report of female athletes, competitive body is still the focus of the report, accounting for 64.3% of the total; The second is the description of life style and body of female athletes, accounting for 20.2%. The gender body description that pays attention to femininity is the least, accounting for 15.4%.

#### 4.3 Reporting Position: Focus on Positive Image Building

The reporting position shows the attitude of the media towards the reporting object, which indirectly affects the public's cognition and behaviour. After analysis, it is found that the reporting position of the WeChat platform of *People's Daily* on female athletes is mainly positive, accounting for 65.2%. The specific performance is to highly praise and affirm the players who win the competition (gold, silver, bronze, promotion) or break the record, and encourage and comfort the players who lose the competition. In addition, when *People's Daily* reported the results of the competition on WeChat, it would adopt neutral words, accounting for 34.8%. Despite reports of failure, there were no negative reports on the reporting position throughout the Winter Olympics.

## 5 Discussion

By above knowable, the *People's Daily* reported WeChat affirmed the female athlete of the field work, mainly described the female athlete's competition state, body shape and the positive image of the female athlete, but reported by WeChat features are still not clear depicting the image of female athletes, this section we will discuss the female athletes and how to present advanced media image.

Under the background of gold medal supremacy, the media image of female athletes is usually tied up with patriotism and nationalism. Similar to the previous study [9], the biggest characteristic of the media image of female athletes is the female label that wins glory for the country. Through the positive image description of female athletes, female

athletes are associated with national glory. For example, in the WeChat report of The Beijing Winter Olympics edition, dislocation of Time and Space, the media image of female athletes for the national competition was created by editing together the glorious moments of female athletes in previous dynasties. But female athletes tend to be more feminine than their male counterparts. Such titles as “girl”, “mother level player” and “grandmother”, such as “One Night, Two Turns back! You can always trust these Chinese girls” and “50 years old so what!”, all highlight the female label of athletes.

Female athletes still cannot escape the status of being watched, and WeChat reports portray cute, lively, tough and gentle images of female athletes by describing life-like clips. Despite the majority of reports on competitive physical condition, there are still a large number of reports on WeChat about female athletes’ post-competition or private life in addition to reports about the victory of competitions. Such as Gu Ailing eating leek box, Fan Kexin’s training routine, foreign athletes’ love for Beijing and so on, the use of “covering their faces and crying”, “smiling face”, “holding tears” and other descriptions to strengthen the traditional female characteristics of female athletes.

Traditional gender culture dictates that “men should be strong, dominant or active; Women should be gentle, passive, dependent or emotional” [17]. The above two female images show that reports about female athletes are still reinforcing the stereotype. This study speculates that the reason for this phenomenon is still related to gender symbolization, which is consistent with previous studies [18]. With the rise of consumerism and the influence of patriarchal culture, under the joint action of social culture, system and media, the image of female athletes has gone through a series of complex production processes, such as reinforcement, exaggeration and regeneration, and finally transmitted to the audience. The media’s portrayal of female athletes has always been shrouded in a “cloud” of stereotypes. On the one hand, in male-dominated arenas, female athletes are constantly required to live according to the gender roles and expectations assigned to them by the dominant player. Therefore, in the sports system dominated by male culture, the body of female athletes is inevitably branded as “meek” and “weak”. On the other hand, it also related to the rise of consumerism, reported by female athletes compact body and a delicate face, the female athlete’s body as a commodity development and packaging, make it become attract men to audiences, fit the demand of male audience for more sharing and liking, gain more traffic, so as to realize the goal of commercialization.

In addition to the above two images, WeChat reports also depict powerful and meaningful female images of female athletes. Through the description of some touching moments of female athletes, the image of independent and warm female athletes is created. For example, the report captures the touching moments of Gu Ailing wiping away tears for Tess Lund after winning the gold medal, ASHLEY Caldwell of the United States and Xu Mengtao who won the gold medal warmly embracing. The story of 29-year-old Maltese girl Spitelli, a German athlete in her late 50s, eating bean buns while dreaming of a racing truck. *People’s Daily* reported on WeChat that female image shaping has gone from “appearance in form” to “internalization in heart”, allowing the audience to have a deeper understanding of the meaning of “self-breakthrough”. Although it is still difficult to get rid of the male gaze in these stories, the real images of female athletes outside the field express positive affirmation of female values and personality spirit, and reflect certain care and respect for female subjects. Female athletes and media have

formed an “inter-constructive” relationship. In such a harmonious and warm atmosphere of communication, the female athletes’ image of mutual understanding, friendship, unity and fair competition created by the media overcomes the gaze of consumerism towards women, which can be described as a qualitative leap in the history of female media coverage of Olympic events.

This study has some limitations. First, the sample selected in this study is the WeChat official account of *People’s Daily*. As the backbone of mainstream media, *People’s Daily* inevitably has some political nature. Secondly, this study only selected WeChat reports on female athletes by *People’s Daily* during the Winter Olympic Games. The sample size has certain limitations and may not represent the complete media image of female athletes. Thirdly, this study lacks comparison. In the follow-up study, two types of newspapers can be selected for horizontal comparison or the Olympic cycle can be selected to compare the changes in the image of female athletes, so as to enrich the research on the image of female athletes.

## 6 Conclusion

In this paper, by the *People’s Daily* during the winter Olympics WeChat reports as the research sample, using the content analysis method, analyses the female athlete’s image during the Beijing Olympics, found its reports on the female athletes with positive attitude, although many reported women’s professional image, portraying female athletes have the power. However, there are still a large number of reports about the female athletes in life, strengthening the traditional female image of the female athletes as sensitive and gentle. The slight gender gap behind *People’s Daily’s* WeChat coverage may be due to the need to balance traffic and value of WeChat public accounts amid the rise of consumerism. At the same time, it also reflects in the era of integrated media. The image of female athletes has changed, they are still being watched under the visual spectacle. Future female athlete reports should promote the Olympic spirit and Chinese sports spirit, and create a more healthy, independent, professional and meaningful female image in the new era, so as to eliminate prejudice and discrimination against female image.

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